

The Case for American Military Disengagement from Northeast Asia

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America should reduce its military presence in the Far East. This would result, in part, in the much called for "peace dividend." Washington currently maintains some 100,000 military personnel in the region. There is little prospect of Russian, North Korean, or Chinese expansionist moves that require such presence. Even if a threat were to emerge, there are regional powers with both incentive and ability to counter it. It is in America's interest to eliminate its military presence in Korea and Japan, forcing these countries to assume the responsibility for their own economic and military stability. The US, as a major Pacific power, should concentrate its military support to the region from bases in Guam, Hawaii, Wake Island and CONUS.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated, "I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."¹ The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the disappearance of governments capable of threatening the survival of America has left the US with few real threats. The US policy of containment and intervention needs restructure. And, along with this restructure is the need to examine our military basing strategies overseas, especially in Northeast Asia.

There are two approaches to view the need for continued US military presence in Japan and Korea. The first is to look towards the Pacific from America and judge the need for

¹Newsweek, April 22, 1991

American interventionist policy. The second is to look from each of the Northeast Asian countries and determine how their interests affect American interests and requirements for forward basing. With both approaches, it is critical to realize that America is a Pacific power with vital interests that require a military presence in the region. The question is whether or not that interest is best served by military basing as it stands now or retrenchment in Guam, Hawaii, and CONUS.

HOW DO WE JUDGE US INTERESTS?

There is an implicit, if not explicit, assumption by the administration that the United States is the only power capable of preserving peace in the world or preventing global domination by a would-be hegemonic state. This analysis may have had validity in the bipolar Cold War period. But in today's multipolar environment, and specifically, with Japanese and Korean economic strength and political stability, the need for US dominated military alliances is an example of obsolete thinking.² Without an entirely new defense strategy, there will be no significant peace dividend for the American people. Washington needs to rethink its commitments and the military forces required to fulfill them.

Military units do not exist for their own sake but to fulfill specific missions...the connection between forces and commitments is crucial.³ Any new strategy must, as a first step, be based on the realistic assessment of US security interests. US interests can be viewed within a framework of country factors of descending importance:

1. Geographic proximity to the US,
2. Economic importance to the US,
3. Military assets and population size.

US national interests, likewise, can be broken down into four factors with decreasing levels of importance:

²Carpenter, Ted Galen and Fiscarelli, Rosemary. Defending America in the 1990s. Cato Institute, August 1990.

³ibid.

1. Vital - threatening the survival of the US,
2. Limited - pertinent but not indispensable to survival,
3. Peripheral - marginally affect US security,
4. Non-interests.⁴

The challenge to US policy makers is to accurately define our interests, avoiding the identification of lesser interests as "vital". Although the identification of interests is inherently subjective, the need to objectively determine our needs in order to reduce a military budget far in excess of our commitments demands critical precision. The defense of vital interests justifies any expenditure to meet the threat. However, the defense of lesser interests must be based on the ability of the government to sustain the necessary commitment.

As the last element of determining US interests and thereby the necessary commitments, a realistic assessment must be made of the potential threats to US security interests. This threat assessment must address two considerations:

1. The source, nature, and severity of the threat,
2. The capability of other powers to neutralize the threat.

Unfortunately, especially with this latter consideration, the US has often adopted a course of subsidizing the defense of countries who have a more vital and immediate stake in

⁴ibid

countering a particular threat and who are more than capable of doing so without US assistance.

There is a suggestion that US military presence (largess) is a wedge for political influence with an ally. The subsidy of prosperous and capable nations who have their own compelling incentives to defend vital interests without US assistance is either an act of misplaced charity or a bribe to preserve waning US preeminence and influence in an alliance...the price of imperial vanity.⁵

⁵ibid.

THE CASE FOR MILITARY RETRENCHMENT

KOREA

Applying a realistic approach to US interests in South Korea provides a different assessment than that of the administration of the need for US military presence on the peninsula. The American security commitment to deter North Korean aggression is currently 43,000 troops at a cost of \$14.5 billion per year. President Bush has stated that troops "...will remain in the Republic of Korea as long as they are needed and as long as we believe it is in the interest of peace to keep them there."⁶

At best, South Korea is a peripheral US security interest. This is indeed confused however by America's emotional commitment to a country where so many American lives were lost to insure its freedom. But, more importantly, the current assessment of US interests fails to take into account South Korea's unilateral ability to counter the North Korean threat. South Korea has twice the population, an immense technological advantage, and a gross national product more than seven times the North's. Without a US presence, South Korea might have to increase its defense expenditure to equal today's deterrence level. But this is a responsibility that South Korea can easily accommodate.

⁶Bush, George. "Address before the National Assembly", February 27, 1989, *Department of State Bulletin*, May 1989.

American troop presence on the peninsula is a trip wire...a North Korean attack, would insure US involvement. We need to rethink American commitment. What would prompt a North Korean attack? There are presently obvious thaws on the peninsula. North and South Korea have formally begun negotiations on a non-aggression treaty. Both countries have been accepted into the United Nations. Indirect trade between them ran to \$127 million in the first half of 1991. The two countries have fielded joint sports teams (table tennis and soccer) and they are negotiating to field a joint team for the 1992 Olympics.⁷ I submit that a North Korean attack is unlikely given these circumstances.

With the weakening of support from its main communist allies, the further isolation of North Korea has prompted it to look for new allies in Asia. Diplomatic relations have been established with the Philippines, and it is negotiating with Japan for formal recognition and financial aid. North Korea currently hosts some fifty-three joint ventures, its airline has begun flying to Hong Kong and Japan, and North Korea will soon begin exporting coal, gold, uranium, and zinc to Japan.

Only in immediately available military strength does the North remain superior to the South. However, Seoul possesses a larger reserve force, more modern weapons, better trained soldiers, and a stronger economy with which to back its military. South Korean military deficiencies are largely the

⁷Bandow, David, UNFREEZING KOREA. *The National Interest*, Fall 1991.

result of the American defense guarantee, which for the most part has relieved Seoul of the need to further enhance its military posture. As long as the US maintains its military presence as a trip wire, the South feels no pressure to expand its forces to cover areas now handled by US forces.

What then should be the new policy and what policy should we continue to emphasize towards Korea?

1. We should Eliminate travel restrictions to North Korea (there are no better ambassadors for the US than private individuals engaged in academic, cultural and economic exchange).
2. We should continue to encourage direct diplomatic engagement between North Korea and its neighbors in the region.
3. We should continue efforts to establish arms proliferation and control as a high priority for the region.⁸

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons on the peninsula is the most problematic issue. If the North develops a nuclear capability, the options for easing a transition to reunification become more difficult. If the North pursues the development of a nuclear bomb, possibilities for resolution of the situation would be as follows:

- an explicit (vice current implicit) Washington nuclear guarantee for Seoul and Tokyo,

⁸ibid

- the creation of a Korean and/or Japanese nuclear bomb,
- a preemptive strike.

As only the first option is at all palatable, it is in the region's and the US' best interest to persuade the North that pursuit of a nuclear capability is unnecessary. Reduction of tensions and maintaining engagement in political and economic areas are critical to this end.

US policy should be aimed at the earliest removal of US military presence from South Korea on a time table coincident with North Korean reduction of tensions and movement toward unification of the peninsula.

JAPAN

United States forward military basing in Japan is really a story about Japan's relations in the Pacific. Originally, the American military was stationed in Japan as a force of occupation and later as a containment force against communism (be it Soviet, Chinese, or North Korean). American troops are now seen to provide a necessary stabilizing influence for the region. The mistrust of Japanese economic and military intentions by the rest of Asia is one that runs deep and is emotionally charged. Of the powers in Northeast Asia, it can be said that Japan alone has historically projected force for her own hegemonic gains. Japan, feeling the need to expand, to control markets, to obtain raw materials, to reduce her

vulnerabilities has attacked beyond her borders, subjugating other cultures in the region. American military presence in Japan is seen as a cork in the bottle. As long as the Americans are there, the Japanese will never again attack their neighbors. This concept has been thought critical to the stability of the region and a vital US interest.

However, with the declining US economic situation and the demise of the Soviet Union, the public demand for a peace dividend has forced a new look at American forward basing in Japan. Despite burden sharing by Japan, there is the potential for large savings in force structure, equipment, and personnel by retrenching America's military with a general call to "bring the military home." Is stability in the region dependent on American military presence on foreign soil? It may be time to break the paradigm of an unfairly competitive and predatory Japanese culture that requires US military presence to prevent its' aggression in the region.

When considering Japan's position in the Pacific, its history and its future, the words of Sir Frank Fox, written in 1928, appear prophetic:

"...Japan's position in the Pacific--that story of a man who chased a grizzly bear and unfortunately caught it. The United States was the chief knocker at the door of sleeping Japan in the nineteenth century. The misfortune of getting one's desires has never been better exemplified in the world's history than in the results which have followed.

Japan awoke, and has been a difficult problem since. She seemed in a flash to learn the whole lesson of our combative civilization--recognition of the importance of naval and military strength; of the value of cheap labour and of machinery in industry; of the high morality of exploiting weak neighbors... Soon Japan was the greatest warrior Power in Asia, and a powerful combatant in that relentless war for markets which is the peace-time passion of nations."⁹

It is obvious that the greatest single problem the Japanese face today is their relationship with other peoples. Japan is not widely liked or trusted. It is feared for its past military record and its current economic success. Its low profile in world politics is looked on with suspicion as an attempt to avoid responsibilities and take advantage of the situation.

There is no denying that Japan is a vital interest of the US. US and Japanese national interests are heavily interrelated. The US and Japan have less than 9% of the worlds population but control 40% of the global GNP and as much as 80% of the world's high technology. The US and Japan are two of the three top importers and exporters in the world in absolute terms (US is the world's largest exporter and

⁹Fox, Sir Frank, The Mastery of the Pacific. London, John Lane the Bodley Head LTD, 1928.

Japan the largest importer of US manufactured goods and agricultural products).¹⁰

The interdependence of markets, financial economies and technology guarantee a US commitment to Japanese stability. But, does the maintenance of 51,000 troops in Japan guarantee this stability? Certainly in the minds of the countries in the region, American presence is critical. But is this truly the case? Or, is American presence retarding the Japanese from assuming responsibility for their own actions in the region? Without US presence, would the Japanese curtail their aggressive economic and political behavior in order to avoid possible military confrontation? I suggest that the Japanese would be much more circumspect about their behavior without US presence to appease other countries apprehensions of Japanese aggression and militarism.

There is a very powerful counter-argument to withdrawal of US troops from Japan. It is an argument rooted in every corner of Asia and in every mind. It is the emotional baggage of history replete with memories of past Japanese aggression and present Japanese prejudice. If mankind is indeed doomed to continuously relive the past, then one must assume that Japan will eventually rearm (as will Germany) and we will again fight. A common view among Japan's East Asian neighbors is that the Japanese are basically militarists, as exemplified by the armed conflicts and conquests of pre-World

¹⁰Auer, Dr. James E., THE NEW PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES". Vanderbilt University, 1992.

War II Japan. In parallel with this militarism is the post World War II concept of the Japanese as "economic animals"...their incomparable organizational efficiency and high risk approach to economic gain bordering on fanaticism.

Culturally, the Japanese view themselves as unique in the world. This promotes a certain arrogance vis-a-vis other people's and a sense of cultural, if not physical, isolationism. They are simultaneously world leaders and world loners. This is a confusing situation that although much discussed in Japan, is not well understood. The origins of this uniqueness are found in Japan's distinctive culture, unusual language, difficult writing, and strong patterns of group organization. Above the close knit family stands the local community, above it the company, and at the top, the nation, which is geographically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from all others. The world is divided between Japan and everyone else.

The Japanese pride themselves on the "purity" of their blood. Nowhere is racial prejudice greater than specifically in Japan and East Asia in general. Although racial revulsion would seem on the whole to be greater for Westerners than other Asians, the Japanese are less tolerant of the Koreans and Chinese than they are of Westerners. Racial prejudice is severe against the Korean population (700,000) who remain in Japan from among those imported for forced labor there during World War II. Despite the forty years of assimilation that has occurred with this population, as much as the law will

permit they are prevented from acquiring Japanese citizenship. Most Japanese feel that marriage with the child of a Korean or Chinese immigrant would sully their pure Japanese blood. Prejudice against darker-skinned Southeast and South Asians is even stronger. In contrast to Western countries who accepted tens of thousands of refugees, the Japanese accepted only a few hundred Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees during the past two decades.

However, despite the emotion and the burden of an intolerant Japanese culture, the threat of Japanese aggression seems faint. It is difficult to imagine a country that has become the second wealthiest economic power in the world through peaceful means resorting to military coercion. If such aggression is possible, then it is in US' interest to see that other East Asian nations (including the Koreas) increase their defense cooperation to deter Japan.

The response to US withdrawal of forces from Japan should not be a more powerful Japan as the threats in the region continue to disappear. Japan should be comfortable with their defensive capabilities. Japan should modestly augment its defensive forces knowing that, as a Pacific power, the US will remain engaged in the region through basing in Guam and Hawaii and carrier battle group deployments. The Japanese should feel no vulnerability with a US withdrawal. Rather than maintain the obsolete policy of trying to keep Japan as a US military protectorate, Washington should encourage Tokyo to assume full

responsibility for its own security. Japan is fully capable of raising whatever forces are necessary for its own defense and contribution to regional and world stability.

Although certainly US presence in Japan is favored by most of the other nations in the Far East, the question remains, what is in the best interest of the American people? The US must not continue to honor expensive military commitments merely to spare Japan and its neighbors the difficulty of overcoming old animosities.¹¹ As stated earlier, military units do not exist for their own sake but to fulfill specific missions...the connection between forces and commitments is crucial.¹² This should be the basis for a critical reexamination of the US commitment to Japan. Military forces do not and should not be used as an excuse to have a place at the political or economic table. The US then becomes a "hollow" player, influencing through military coercion, a throw-back to less modern times.

¹¹Carpenter, Ted Galen and Fiscarelli, Rosemary. Defending America in the 1990s. Cato Institute, August 1990.

¹²ibid.

CONCLUSION

The US needs to restructure its entire security strategy in Northeast Asia. The basis for this restructuring should be the removal of US military forces from South Korea and Japan. The savings for demobilization of some of these forces, no longer required for containment and Asian stability policies, could amount to \$28 billion.¹³ Because US interests in the Pacific are vital, America needs to maintain sufficient force to defend this lengthy perimeter. Forces removed from Japan and Korea (and the Philippines) should be used to expand naval and air facilities on Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii.

¹³ibid